

Draft

Com. Coolidge, Com. Trotsky and the Negro Question

Com. Coolidge writes: " It is reported that Com. T. held the view that the N. in the US is a nation, basing himself in part on his belief that the N. here has a separate language. During the National Training School in the lecture devoted to 'The N. & the Unions', I made reference to this position of Com. T. I said that his ignorance of the N. ques. in the U.S. was probably profound & complete." (My emphasis)

I doubt that the presumptuous air that Com. C. has indulged in here flows from so abysmal ignorance of Com. T's position on the N. ques. on the part of Com. C. as he alleges is profundity of Com. T's ignorance of the N. ques. Rather the presumptuousness flows from the fact that Com. C. is arguing against his own kind of opponents. He is not arguing against Com. T's position, but against a position he himself has elaborately wrought out of thin air, labelled wrong and "exposed". We shall soon see how Com. C. puts up his straw men and mows them down. But before analyzing C's vehement opposition to his own straw men, it is necessary to know what in reality is the Party position, not the one C. ascribes to it, but it is as formulated in documents, and how it arrived at that position.

The background

When the Stalinists were dizzily advocating "self determination for the black belt", the Party, as per usual, had no position. Com. Sh. made a study of the N. question in which he proved--at least to the satisfaction of the present writer who then held his position--that the slogan of economic, political and social equality for the Negroes was sufficient to solve the Negro problem in America. Trotsky disagreed. He stated that just because the Stalinists were for their self-determination, we need not necessarily be again that slogan; that in no case should we definitely commit ourselves against the slogan for all time since it was a question the Negroes themselves must decide and if they should ask for it, first we would have to fight for it, or, if we were in power, would have to grant it. He emphasized that he, Trotsky, had not studied the Negro question and had no definite opinion. But he was drawing from his experiences during October:

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many nationalities asked for self-determination after October. Naturally, it was granted them. But the crucial point was that not only had the Tsarist Empire not known of ~~some~~ some of these nationalities but even the Bolshevik leaders did not know they existed as separate cultural entities. It was only with October that ^{oppressed} these/groups began to feel they were men who wished to decide their own fate. Therefore, concluded, T, it would be wrong, on the basis that the Negro did not now ask for self-determination, to shut the door on that question for the future.

Com. Swabeck visited Com. T. during that period and ~~and~~ ^{after} a very ~~xxx~~ brief conversation with him was convinced of the correctness of Com. Trotsky's position. During that conversation, Com. Trotsky inquired, parenthetically ~~some~~, wasn't it true that some of the Negroes used a different language? That conversation was reproduced for the information of the membership. In its majority, I should say, the NY membership was much opposed to the fact that a few brief questions and one single instance of a definite opinion based on the Russian experience were sufficient to "convince" Com. Sw. that Shachtman was wrong & Tr's position, which he had never elaborated as such, right. But that was an opposition to Cannonite methods of arriving at political positions ^{rather} than to either position as such. As a matter of fact we knew so little of Negro history that for the maj. of us that was the the 1st we had heard that there was such a Negro tribe in Am.

Com. Sh. did not pursue his position. If my memory is right, he had never published or even mimeographed the results of his study and only the N.Y. ~~membership~~ who heard his oral report at ANY educational knew of it other than by third-ear hearsay. The minute it was known that Com. T. did not share Com. Sh's views, ~~Com.~~ Wright embarked upon what he thought was T's position; study to prove ~~the~~ ~~xxxxxxx~~; that "study" was never completed. ^{Proving it} ~~was~~ some comrades on the West Coast/had made a study but I had never seen it.

I continued to hold Com. Sh's position. I felt that Com. T. "did not know enough", etc. of the Negro ques. When I was in Wash., prior to my departure to Mexico, I was instrumental in having a professor at Howard, who was an ex-member of the C.P., draft a document on the Negro in America to be sent to LT. The document may not have been as lengthy as Com. Coolidge's but it had the benefit of being more coherent. Its theme was that the Negro masses not only did not wish self-determination but were opposed to it; that in fact it was only the Negro "bourgeoisie" who favored such segregation, ^{only} in order to have the privilege of exploiting the Negro masses themselves. ^{AS finally} ~~AS finally~~ ^{also} the professor went into detail of how all the Negro leaders in the C.P. opposed the slogan when ^{was first launched} ~~was first launched~~ Com. Trotsky's files, I found when I got down ^{there} in 1936-7 to work there, were filled with just such documents, "proving" that the Negro had no separate culture from that of the US, ^{no separate} ~~no separate~~ language, and no desire to be jim-crowed once again now under the euphemous title of self-determination. So Com. T. "did know" the N. ques.--that is ^{traditional} did know what those who held to the/slogan of social, eco. & pol. equality as sufficient to cover the ques. wished him to know. But he ^{felt} that he had not studied the ques. and hence could not have a definitive position on the ques. ⁽³⁾ He felt ^{it was} that it was up to the Am. section to elaborate such a definitive position after a profound study of the Am. Civil War, without a thorough knowledge of which he felt any study of the Negro ques. would be incomplete. ⁽¹⁾ He stated, ~~furthermore~~, that the Negro intellectuals were not the best judges of what the Negro masses wanted. The intellectuals were "emancipated" and wished full social equality with the white. But the Negro masses continued to flock to the churches where they could be free of "white eyes". ⁽²⁾ ~~Finally he~~ ^{felt} that he didn't really need to be "convinced" ~~that--as all Trotskyists had rushed to inform him--that~~ Garvey was a faker. What he wished "the American comrades" would ^{see} ~~him~~ ^{is} why such a faker got such a mass following. What in the faker's program inspired the Negro masses to join him, but did not inspire them to join us.

Com. J. arrived after I left. His lengthy conversations with T. were mimeographed. At the ~~next~~ convention preceding our expulsion

from the SWP & Negro Comm. was elected to work out a draft thesis based on these discussion. Com. C. was on that commission and opposed the draft it drew up, not because it advocated self-determination--no one advocated any such thing--or any of the other straw men, such as race-consciousness that he now has put up. I do not know why he did oppose it. I do know that he offered no counter-resolution, despite his voiceferous objections. That resolution we did not reject when we were expelled. The proposals Coolidge now offers ~~afterxhax~~ differ in no essential respect from those, despite the big talk of "reorienting the party" ~~and finally adopting a definitive position; in some respects they backtrack.~~ That resolution plus the lengthy discussions should be republished and should serve as a basis for elaborating a ^{more definitive} resolution. They will prove conclusively the ^{presumptuousness} ~~the ignorance~~ of C., not/of Com. T.

II. The Basis

When Com. C. says that before we can have a fundamental position on the Negro ques. we must know our historical background, he is, whether he admits it or not, taking the position Com. T. has so long insisted upon. To that extent his methodology is correct. The trouble is that it is ~~superimposed upon~~ ^{an enhanced Marxist criterion} a basis of ill-digested facts. He says, for instance, that in the particular economy of the South, "slave labor was so cheap that the dev. of other methods of prod. were not indicated." There is no doubt that slave labor is cheap; but so it would have been in the North. Why did it take root in the South only? He almost hit the right spot when he spoke of the particular economy but he ~~then~~ promptly diverted from the correct basis by his emphasis on the cheapness of slave labor. ^{It} is not the mode of labor that calls forth the mode of production, but the mode of prod. ^{bring about} corresponding mode of labor. Slave labor was not suited to the economy of the No., industrialized even for those days. From the very first days the North had lumber mills, for ex., and was becoming industrialized along with, if not to the extent of, the mother country, ^{and needed} "free" labor. ~~Slave labor, however, was suited to~~ the agricultural South however, particularly the crops specialized in, ~~slave labor was suited~~ ^{that we done} not so much because slaves were cheap but because they were as productive as the economy had need of. ^{It} would not stop at this point if it were merely a question of abstract theory, but only because C., having established a wrong theoretical basis, proceeds to draw ~~an~~ and reactionary conclusion when he says that the "disabilities" (C.'s terminology for the double oppression the Negro bears as a proletarian and as a Negro) the Negroes suffered were not removed by emancipation because: "The emancipated slaves were not prepared to take a place in industry." That is as reactionary a phrase as I have ready in any bourgeois textbook where that fact is attested to "to prove" that the master-slave relationship was after all the best relationship -- for the slave! Now, of course, C. did not mean that. That isn't the point. The point is that one says all kinds of

things one does not "mean", once the theoretic base is wrong.

What does "not prepared to take a place in industry" mean anyway? Where the "emancipated" serfs in Europe prepared to take a place in industry? It was industry that prepared them for that place. Had industry moved South it would have "prepared" the Negro to take a place in it. Post-Civil War South did not "prepare" "white trash" for industry either. ~~haxxaxx~~ ~~indusaxriakiaakliakixxaxxaxxkigiklaxixaxxaxixixaxx~~ The South could not Economically "emancipate" either the Negroes or the "white trash" because it itself was not economically free, that is not industrialized. The white carpet baggers ~~gaxxaxxaxx~~ the South, but merely sponged upon it. Instead of being a prosperous colony of England, the South became a defeated "colony" of the No. capitalists, because, not Cotton, but Steel was king.

In the same non-Marxian manner that Coolidge speaks of the Negroes "not being prepared", he speaks of "reenslavement" using the word loosely, without regard to the mode of prod. which is the decisive issue. After C. correctly stresses the fact that young capytaly exploited the Negroes doubly and kept them in inferior position as agricultural laborers "away from the enlightening experiences of factory work", he concludes, without warning, so-to-speak: "Thus was the Negro reenslaved by the bourgeoisie with bonds which remained unbroken to the present day."

(My emphasis-FF) What broke those bonds today? Has the Negro been "emancipated" again? Was a Civil War necessary to assert that freedom? A civil war was not necessary for the simple reason that the Negro has not and could not have been "reenslaved" because the mode of production had developed along capitalist lines on a nation-wide scale. What is the point of using the word "reenslave" so loosely? When he "wants to" C. himself puts the case clearly when he says "In all capitalist society I suppose there has been no worker so 'free' as the Negro." Put two hurrahs beside this Marxist explanation of the word "free" worker. And because he is so free, that is because he is economically, ~~axixixaxix~~ a wage slave, his bonds could be so easily broken on the eve when war economy demands a large supply of free labor, with or without "disabilities".

~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ knowledge of the 3 centuries of slave status is sufficient to fully of the Negro ~~xxx~~ not/explain the present "disabilities" (read: dual oppression of the Negro) of the Negroes. Something more is necessary. Instead of analyzing ~~it~~ that something more, however, Com. C. has turned ^{it} into the big bogeyman: race consciousness. Let us watch how he has built his straw man, and mowed him down with the superior class consciousness.

III. Race Consciousness and Class Consciousness

Com. C. asserts that "the Negro masses dev. the theory & practice of race consciousness". The N. masses may "practice", that is, feel race conscious but they surely developed no theory about it. Those who did develop a theory, such as ~~the~~ Garbey, ~~movement~~ came to take advantage of that feeling, in order to lead it into reactionary channels. ~~Com. C.~~

However place in that category? The Garvey movement.
~~can't that race consciousness and then to turn around and xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

~~xxxx working Negro xxxxxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxx~~ place in the same category of ~~race consciousness~~ the Negro proletarian in Buffalo who said "he did not want social equality, that he was willing & preferred to confine his social life to "my own people." ~~is to put the imperialist faker and the poor man, both of whom speak of the protection of their country in one category.~~ "When the worker says he wants to defend his country, it is the instinct of an oppressed man that speaks in him," wrote Lenin, but C. places both an imperialist faker &

Race consciousness, C. assures us, "promotes acceptance of Jim-Crow, promotes acceptance of cap. and bourgeois democracy, implies class homogeneity of the Negroes and becomes "a theory of class collaboration"

The theory of self-determination directly flows from that; race consciousness gives it the appearance of ~~xxxx~~ conflict between races & leads to cult of N. Nat'l., the logical dev. of which is advocacy of N.State (12). Against whom is C. arguing? Who is advocating either self-determination or the formation of a Negro State? ~~xxxx~~ No one, *in fact*

no no one that I ever heard. C. has built up straw men and mowed them down

Coolidge assures us that he is for class consciousness vs. race consciousness. Good! How does that solve the special problem of the Negro? That it is a special problem C. admits. In fact, once he puts quotation marks around "race consciousness" and then ~~parrots~~

is permitted to use the words "group disability", he in fact describes that "race consciousness", if you will, ^{with} which the Negro proletarians are permeated and which is healthy and which we support. For the Negro as an "oppressed race", even when in quotation marks, does have to fight against Jim-crow, discrimination and the double oppression the Negro no doubt suffers. Coolidge correctly assures us that "It is the struggle of an oppressed race to bring itself up to the level of other groups and races". He is, rightly, for active participation in this struggle. He furthermore assures us it is a unique struggle "and must not therefore be subsumed under democ. struggle of white wkrs. or dissolved in rev. struggle." The man who puts up the best arguments against Coolidge

is still Coolidge. *Why then the contradictions? What is eating Coolidge? What is eating the capitalist? What is eating the proletariat? Is it the other party? Is it the other party he says he is for?*

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IV. "Negro Particularism" vs. Coolidge equanimity

A clue to the contradictions can be found in Coolidge's treatment of what he calls Negro particularism, and which he defines as "the advocacy of separatist tendencies within the framework of bourgeois democ. in the U.S. That is the advocacy of Negro going it alone organizationally, socially and economically to whatever extent is possible." He then proceeds to analyze a second characteristic of N. particularism which has nothing at all to do with the first. The second characteristic is "the doctrine that N. as Negroes are, or are likely to become the chief driving force of social change in the U.S." Now, pray tell me, what has the alleged doctrine of the Negro's special revolutionary role got to do with ~~that~~ that of separatism within the framework of bourgeois democracy? None, unless ^{emasculate the expression,} ~~you~~ ^{make it synonymous with separatism.} driving force of social change, and make it synonymous with separatism. What is that C. is trying to stress when he emphasizes that ~~that~~ ~~he can~~ "think of no reason whatever for holding to this belief" ~~that~~ (I'm presuming that this sentence does not refer to his parathetical expression as to belief that Negroes are a nation since the latter sentence was not in the parenthesis. If, however, I'm wrong, there still remains the implication that any doctrine that envisages the Negroes as a special driving force of social change is wrong.)As a specially oppressed group with least to lose there is no doubt that the Negroes once awakened will play an especially militant role. Even in a passive way, they now play such a role by their ^{anti-war} attitude, ~~which~~ which is far to the left of the Am. wkgclass as a whole. On the other hand, it is true that the white wkgclass as the majority group in this country will either play the chief revolutionary role, or there will be no successful revolution. ~~The~~ The understanding of that is behind the dissatisfaction that rev. groups are led by "foreigners" or "Jews" ^{is} in any country, not because of any prejudice against them but because it is a sign of the weakness of the movement, of the fact that it has not yet taken root in native soil. ~~But~~ But within

that over-all truth, special groups do play specially significant parts in a revolutionary struggle. Again Coolidge himself is the best authority against himself when in another section of the document he speaks of why we wish to draw the N. proletariat into our ranks. "The Negro proletarians have become inured to hardships, tough going and iron rations. They are not soft." Fine, those are the qualities a revolutionary movement needs; our special appeal to the Negroes is not ~~only~~ that they are an especially oppressed group and we wish to "help" them but because they ~~are~~ comprise especially steeled elements that will "help" bring the revolution on, or when it gets going, help bring it to a successful revolution.

V--Revolutionary vs. Reformist View on Negro problem

Peculiarly enough, the discussion on Negro particularism followed the discussion of "subsuming" the Negro struggle in/struggle of white wkr. or "dissolving" it in rev. struggle. It was the third in a series of mistakes on this question. The other two mistakes were: (1) bourgeois (or what C. calls reformist) error that the "struggle for democ. rts. in bourgeois democ. is only struggle and the totality of one's aims." and (2) the reformist or social democratic (C. calls it social reformist) view that "no special forms of struggle are indicated in the case of the N., that the transformation from capitalism to socialism will solve the problem." Very instructive as to C.'s own attitude is his criticism of this view: "This position ignores the painful fact that men's minds are not changed overnight and that the struggle against race prejudice would not end instantly with the overthrow of cap." (3) It is not the doctrine itself which C. criticizes. It is not evidently wrong now, but will be wrong after (1) the rev. because men's minds do not change overnight. C. thus ~~transfers~~ shifts the solution of the N. problem from this generation and puts it on those that will remain after the rev. My dear man, the fact that men's minds will not change overnight has absolutely nothing to do with the struggle against race prejudice now, nor against the complacent attitude of the S-D as a reformist current which we must combat now. The S-D says that the transformation from cap. to soc. will solve the problem because they do not wish to make any revolutionary moves now; they are satisfied to participate

in the struggle against race prejudice to the extent of the liberals and no more, to circumscribe it that is within the framework of bourgeois democracy, or to doctor up the latter, not transform it. Perhaps here and there there is a member of the S-D who thinks that that is the solution--the revolution will take care of it. But regardless of what they think, the ~~maxix~~ objective policy leads to push that problem further away from a solution by pushing the revolution itself further and further away from placing it on the agenda of today instead of the tomorrow.

But what Coolidge finds to criticize is not their policy today but the fact that their policy does not envisage the minds of men tomorrow!

How is it that a revolutionary leader is constantly slipping into a reactionary channel he does not "mean" to get to? What is eating Coolidge?

VI Garveyism: contrasting C's attitude and T's attitude

We're back to where we started: the approach to the Negro question. In addition to saying it was reactionary, he states that the fact that the Garvey planned to set up his republic in a foreign land was not the decisive factor that made Negroes indifferent. (10) But that isn't true. Its reactionary character is precisely in that it demanded a separate state --in Africa. That way the most reactionary Bilbo could support it. Had it demanded it here --it would have raised such revolutionary situation that not only no reactionary could support it, but the Govt. would have to be looking for other ways of solving the N. problem than by giving a few Negroes good govt. positions and have ^{Mrs.} Roosevelt appear on the same platform with a few others. As it is the Negroes preferred Ga. soil that he knew African soil that he did not.

Toward religion too one can easily see the difference in approach. Coolidge tries to avoid the question by stating that all of America is religious conscious forgetting the distinguishing feature that white Am. goes for custom but black Am. goes to a place where he can finally be rid of white eyes.